

# Pod casting feedback to students: Students' perceptions of effectiveness

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## Introduction

Providing effective feedback to students has been repeatedly associated as a key strategy in the learning and teaching process (Poulos & Mahony, 2007). However, much of the research on student feedback has focused on timing, content and student interpretation (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Yorke, 2002).

A review of several feedback intervention studies (Knight & Yorke; Mory, 2004; O'Donovan *et al.*, 2004) revealed a number of consistent characteristics. Firstly, it is generally accepted that feedback on assessed tasks should maintain a balance of positive and negative comments (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). However, it has also been suggested, in practice that this procedure may be problematic (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Secondly, studies have indicated that students may find difficulty with the interpretation of academic language (Chanock, 2000) and consequently may not totally conceptualise the 'true' meaning of the intended feedback message. Thirdly, perceptions of fairness have been suggested to influence the effectiveness of the intended feedback strategy (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). In particular, the congruence between assessment outcomes and the management of the assessment process and the nature of the feedback strategies (Whittington *et al.*, 2004).

According to Poulos and Mahony (2007) the research on students' perceptions of feedback is currently inadequate. The purpose of this small study was therefore an attempt to address this potential disparity, by pod casting feedback to a small group of level one sport development undergraduate students. The motivations for this study were generated by a number of recent observations and experiences from the author's role as a personal tutor on the sport development undergraduate programme at Liverpool John Moores University. Firstly, a number of the students had indicated on selected module evaluation forms a frustration with current feedback mechanisms and processes. These included timing of feedback (especially year end assessments) and consistency of tutor comments. Secondly, the author held a personal view that students were ignoring annotated qualitative comments and instead focused exclusively on the allocated grade.

This study therefore reports on the perceived effectiveness of pod casting feedback to a small number of level one sport development students, enrolled on a personal, developing and planning module (PDP). Specifically, the following questions guided the research project.

1. What are the students' views and perceptions of current feedback processes and mechanisms?
2. What were the student perceptions of Pod casting as an alternative feedback approach?

## Methods

### Participants

The sample for this study were an intact group ( $n=8$ ) (male=5; female=3) of level one sport development students enrolled a year long PDP module. This intact group of students met with the author on various occasions throughout the academic year and formed the basis of a personal tutor group. All of the participants provided written informed consent.

### Methodology

The level one sport development PDP module is 24 credits and year long. The module was delivered by specialist PDP staff in whole class lectures. These were supported by additional smaller group tutorials by all the sport development team. The assessment protocols for the module included: the production of and delivery of an individual web-site, four individual reflective presentations, a 2,000 word written assignment and finally a 750 word written action plan. The assessments were conducted in semester 1 and semester 2 and specifically in Week 7, Week 12, Week 25 and Week 31 of the University academic calendar.

Following the submission of an assessed piece of work each member of the group received feedback via an audio mp3 file. This process involved the author recording qualitative comments using an Olympus (WS-300M) voice recorder. The comments were then converted to audio file format using a converter software package 'audacity'. Each audio file was between 3 and 4 minutes in length and the file size was approximately 0.80 MB. Each student received the mp3 file via an e-mail and was requested to acknowledge receipt of the file. Additionally, each student was requested to include a follow up e-mail identifying any comments or concerns. The author attempted to avoid colloquial comments in the feedback and ensure that any suggestions were relevant to future assignments. The mark for the assessed piece of work was revealed at the end of the pod cast.

### Data collection and analysis

After the submission of the final assessment task the author conducted a focus-group interview to establish the thoughts and feelings regarding the assessment process and specifically the use of pod casting as an alternative strategy. The interview lasted approximately fifty-seven minutes and was attended by every member of the group. The interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the author.

Transcripts were initially checked by the author and then forwarded to the participants for member checking. Apart from a small number of interpretation and grammatical errors the transcripts were deemed to be an accurate record of the interview.

Thematic analysis was applied to the data and following themes emerged as relating to the effectiveness of current assessment strategies and the use of pod casting as an alternative.

## Results and Discussion

### Focus on the mark

A key theme which emerged from the data was the exclusive focus on the mark. Higgins *et al.* (2002:54) refer to students as 'instrumental consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark?' The findings of this study tend to support this view. For instance a number of respondents comments included:

*I don't bother reading the comments a lot of the time; I just go straight to the mark. I only look at the comments if I have to.*  
(Respondent 3)

*Unless the mark is a really poor one I tend to ignore it, maybe it's because it's the first year and you only need 40% to pass. I think in year 2 I may look at more of the comments.* (Respondent 4)

### Feed-forward

The interviews also revealed that the students welcomed more feed forward and less description about the content of the work. It was generally agreed that the feedback provided indicated 'what' was wrong but didn't necessarily include 'how' to do it differently. For instance:

*I think they could do more about what to do next time...they just criticise you and say do it differently, they don't actually state how to do it the correct way.*  
(Respondent 1)

The students were particularly vociferous about tutors who used 'Why' and 'What' which they argued were neither encouraging nor particularly constructive.

The use of pod casting was generally welcomed more positively than the traditional written approach to providing feedback. In contrast to the findings of previous studies, the students appreciated the timing of the feedback, perceived it to more personal and welcomed the clarity in the comments.

### Timing

According to Higgins *et al.* (2002) if feedback is not timely students may be reluctant to engage in the feedback process and consequently allow little opportunity to engage in reflection. The findings from this study suggest that pod casting is a mechanism which speeds up this process as the feedback is forwarded directly to the student.

### The Personal Touch

The students also mentioned the personal nature of the pod cast. For instance one of the respondents stated:

*I actually felt as though you had read the work in detail and you were taking a real interest, to hear your voice was really reassuring* (Respondent 6).

### Clarity

Another perception included the clarity of the recorded message. The students had previously claimed that they were on occasions confused or unsure about written comments. This approach appeared to provide the additional clarity which was required.

*I suspect you can say more when you record it...in that way I liked the way you gave examples of what I should have done...this was really useful for the web-site but I needed the essay alongside the comments to be the same for the written assignment.* (Respondent 4)

This comment in particular is a good example of one of the deficiencies of the pod casting strategy. For instance, the students felt as though pod casting was really useful for the individual presentations and the web-site. However, for the essay they required a copy of the assignment as well, in order to contextualise the comments fully.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this small scale pilot project was to investigate the current perceptions of student feedback mechanisms and in particular the use of pod casting as an alternative strategy.

The initial findings suggest that the students welcomed the pod cast more favourably than traditional written/annotated feedback approaches in oral and practical assessments. However, for written assignments the pod cast was found to be less effective as the students requested both the audio feedback and a copy of the written assignment.

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